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THE INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

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A problem not generally recognized in colleges is that of "the introductory course." Almost every department maintains a course for beginners which aims at once to introduce students to the work of the department and to serve as a means of general culture. For instance, the introductory course in chemistry usually handles two kinds of students in the same way. The man who is going to spend years in specialization in chemistry and the man whose entire contact with the subject will be limited to this one year's work take the course side by side. In the same way the introductory course in the study of English literature is taken by two kinds of students: by those whose special interest lies in the field of literature, and by those who take it as a means of acquiring general culture. The question has arisen in my mind, after several years' work with this course, whether teachers generally recognize the difficulty of presenting exactly the same matter to an audience which is really so thoroughly divided in aim and purpose. Indeed, the longer I teach English the more I come to the conclusion that the introductory course in English literature is, as far as the general student is concerned, not productive of the best results. I believe that at its worst it is productive of a dry formalism, and that at its best it badly hampers the teacher, by forcing him to put a greater emphasis upon biographical and historical details and the general accompaniments of literature than upon the meaning and value of literature itself. The special student may in the course of his studies get the right point of view toward literature; the average student, however, who, though usually unconsidered, constitutes the greater part of the class, finds in this course the one opportunity of his life to make a guided study of literature. I believe that, as far as he is concerned, the great value of literature, the fact that it is an interpretation and impression of life, is lost in the maze of

dates and influences and details that unavoidably demand the attention.

The aim of the general outline course in English literature ought to be and professedly is to give the young men and the young women some knowledge of, and insight into, the great sweep of literature in English; to make them sharers in the imperishable thought of the world; to awaken them to the joy and cheer that come from companionship with the great literary artists; and to stimulate in them a love of books and a desire to read for themselves. As the introductory course in literature is generally taught today, this aim is neglected. For the course is the history of English literature. The emphasis is upon development and evolution. The attempt is to show the gradual progress of expression in prose and verse from the beginning to the present time. The period must be considered first; the author and his life second; the author's work last. Obviously the important thing for the student is to get his historical perspective right, to keep in mind who wrote what, to remember the dates of the birth and death of several dozen of the more important writers. I have heard a college lecturer spend two hours of the three allotted to Shelley in discussing Shelley's life; nearly every textbook carefully tabulates the four characteristics of the romantic period as if that wonderful epoch were purely a scientific phenomenon; the bare college records of the Elizabethans are gravely set forth; and all of us now and then feel constrained to spend as much time carefully listing the political events of the Renaissance as we do trying to make our students realize the extraordinary freshness and spontaneity of the song-makers of the age of Shakspeare. All the textbooks refer at large to ten times as many writers as the student will ever meet with at first hand during the year, and every lecturer dictates lists of books by the various authors studied which the student could not read in a course extending over five years instead of one. The student gets a conception of literature as something illustrating history, and comes away from the course with a heap of knowledge which is informative, to be sure, but not productive. One can read twenty school texts without finding out what literature is good for after all, and hear fifty lecturers without learning how to appreciate a

novel or a poem or acquiring even a modicum of literary taste. For the special student of literature, of course, this is all very well; but how many students who have passed through a year of the "history of English literature" are going to be special students of English? They are going to read—some of them—poetry, plays, essays, novels, and they are not going to bother very much about the influence of Wordsworth, or Marlowe's influence upon Shakspeare. They are going to read what they like, and it depends a good deal upon how we teach literature whether they are going to like the writings of those men whose vision has been clear and steady or whether they are going to like trash. If we are to give them a taste for the best of the past and the most worthy of the present, we must face the problem of combating in our courses in literature the forces of puerility and banality, and we meet the average student but once, in the general course in English literature. After several years' teaching I feel that the fight cannot be waged by a method which is based fundamentally upon the acquisition of a mass of facts about literary history, with the consequent necessity of emphasizing biographical and historical details and of studying works of purely historical value.

I know that it will be urged that the higher purpose which I mentioned earlier is in the minds of the greater number of instructors in English in this country. But I maintain that the present system of instruction badly hampers the man who has some desire to keep that purpose always in the foreground. Just so much historical material must be covered; so many facts and names must be learned. As little free play as possible is left to the individual instructor who wants to make his students feel the magic of literature. A moment's consideration will show anyone that in a single year's course of three hours a week an instructor has all he can do to crowd in all the facts which must be learned, and learned by young people whose training and environment are all against a true appreciation of literary values. To meet the needs of such students the course should aim at enforcing, above everything else, the meaning and value of literature. As it is now constituted it gives the maximum opportunity for the instructor to be dull and the minimum opportunity for him to be inspiring.

The evils of the present method of teaching have long been evident. Every writer on the teaching of English, every institute lecturer, repeats the same old truths: be inspiring; give your attention to the piece of literature itself; don't be pedantic; instil some standards of taste in your students. And the patient teacher tries to do it, with the "history of literature" blocking his vision, a history which needs for right comprehension a mature and philosophical mind and an intimate knowledge of hundreds of books.

It is of course futile to deny that the chronological approach to literature is immensely interesting and that it has been very fruitful in the study of literature. To many people the life of Byron is more interesting than his poems, and research into the meta-physical poets more stimulating than an attempt to realize what after all gives the Cavalier lyrics their charm. But it is doubtful whether the knowledge of the fact that Shelley ran away with Mary Godwin helps the average youngster very much to realize the poignant longing of "O World, O Life, O Time." How little time there is in the course of a single year to get the student into the frame of mind where he can catch the beauty of "The Blessed Damozel," the magic of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," or the sweet sanity of the *Canterbury Tales*! Many an instructor too easily yields to the temptation of discussing Dryden's religious swervings rather than working might and main to make the student realize the charm of his manly and virile verse. The fact that the *Lyrical Ballads* were published in 1798 is a fact worth knowing, but it is worthless unless at the same time the student catches something of the enduring beauty of Wordsworth. It is easy to say that both ought to be learned; I agree, but I maintain that the emphasis ought not to be placed upon the date of publication. One can know historical details without appreciating literature and appreciate literature without knowing historical details; and since it is doubtful whether students can in the course of a single year do both, I maintain that the history should be given distinctly the minor emphasis. Of course it is far easier for a student to learn plain facts than to perceive the intensity of poetry, but it is also far easier for a student to forget the facts so assiduously learned than to lose sight of the land of poetry once it has come within his ken.

And yet there is no reason why the teaching of English literature need lack method. It is easy enough to adopt a classification based upon what the writer was trying to do rather than upon the time in which he lived. If we regard literature as the expression in prose and verse of a reaction from life which is broad and deep enough to make a permanent appeal to men, we can see that we may divide it into two great divisions—direct expression and indirect expression. The first division would include all that literature which is generally comprised under the terms lyric and essay; the second all that which may be called in the broadest sense fiction: the epic, the ballad, the romance, the allegory, the novel, the play, and the short story. The object in such a study is not to frame definitions of lyric, drama, etc., but rather to group together for convenience those pieces of literature which are most akin to each other in form and spirit. The method of study would be to start with the writings themselves, to try to find out what the author was trying to say, to discover the source of the continued appeal in the work, and to seek to induce, if possible, from the experience of the centuries some criteria of good literature. Understand that this method is to be applied to beginners, with a fairly small body of recognized classics. Once the student has gained some idea of what literature is, he can if he will pass in other courses into the advanced study of its history.

I am reminded of the Sophomore course in logic which Dean Meiklejohn, now president of Amherst, gave us at Brown University. We spent the year trying to answer the question "What is truth?"—trying, in other words, to discover as well as we could what philosophy is before we attempted to study its history. Surely to begin with young people on a course which would aim to study at first hand the great lyrics, essays, novels, and dramas of English literature would be better than a beginning course in their history. The very fact that every boy and girl studies the classics in preparatory school would add to the value of such a course, for it would, properly taught, lead to a unified impression of literature which hitherto had been revealed only in sections.

Literature taught from this point of view does not begin with the "Anglo-Saxon period." The student does not have to be led

back to a past which is quite beyond his comprehension, where he must study in translation works, as they seem to him, of purely curious interest. He begins his work by reading lyrics, the simple outpouring of the human spirit. Nor is it a case of reading a lyric here and another there, but of reading them in bulk. In such a study "The Sea-Farer" is not a pagan Anglo-Saxon poem, by an anonymous author, illustrating the Saxon love of the sea, variously interpreted as an allegory or a dialogue, etc. It is a poem in which a man tells of the longing that fills him when he sees the ocean, and that is all. And that is all it ought to be. The man who wrote it was not "illustrating his period" or providing matter for the study of prosody. So it is when the student comes to the Elizabethan lyrics. Here are some songs written by men who were full of the joy and zest of life. The aim of the teacher is to make the student perceive that joy and zest; he need not bother about emphasizing the fact that the Elizabethan song-writers received their impetus from Italy, for he is dealing, not with students who want to become familiar with currents of literary development, but with young people who want to know what the inspiration of literature can be. It is well enough to talk of the difficulty of understanding literature without an elaborate knowledge of the spirit of the times, but the fact remains that the greater the literature the higher it is above that spirit. "O Mistress mine, where are you roaming?" and "Let me not to the marriage of true minds" are of all time and of no time. The *Babes Boke* or *The Scholemaster* need commentaries; the works of literature that breathe the spirit of immortality need for beginners only the comment of the teacher who loves them.

In the new method of instruction the teacher who wants eternally to classify and diagram would of course be a failure. A method so free and intimate needs the teacher who can understand something of the poet's intention and make his students understand it too. I cannot imagine him setting his students to work on an analysis of the rhyme scheme of "The world is too much with us" until he could be sure that most of his students understood what was in Wordsworth's heart that he should say, "Great God! I'd rather be a Pagan." Such a teacher, given the simple method of teaching literature informally by types, though he might not be

able to give his students so much information as he otherwise could, might be trusted to supply them with something rarer—power. And is not power to read, to enjoy, to see life better because of the acquaintance with men who have known life well, the aim of the study of literature? From the questions of fact demanded of high-school Seniors or college Freshmen one would suppose that a knowledge of the names of the poems of Crabbe or of the date of the publication of the “Prelude” were a condition of literary salvation. The only condition of literary salvation for a young man or woman ought to be that he have some love for literature and some literary taste which he can use in his daily reading.

And the development of literary taste is to be obtained, not from studying the facts of the history of literature, but from studying, with as little commentary as possible, the works themselves. An author writes because he has something to say, and if what he says is of interest in itself long after his time, it is literature. The method of teaching which aids best in disclosing the interest of literature is obviously the most efficient, especially when it is remembered that the students under consideration are not going to be specialists in the field. That method, I believe, is one which is based upon the work itself, the method of classification by types, which emphasizes literary expression and throws the historical and biographical comment into the background.